

Congress Presses White House to Take Control of Pacific Island Talks

IP foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/08/congress-presses-white-house-to-take-control-of-pacific-island-talks

Report

China is building military bases all over the Pacific. U.S. access is hung up over decades-old nuclear tests.

By **Jack Detsch**, *Foreign Policy's* Pentagon and national security reporter, and **Zinya Salfiti**, an intern at *Foreign Policy*.

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Palau's President Surangel Whipps (L) meets with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken at the State Department in Washington, DC, August 4, 2021. Kevin Lamarque / POOL / AFP) (Photo by KEVIN LAMARQUE/POOL/AFP via Getty Images

September 8, 2021, 5:06 PM

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A growing group of lawmakers is pressing the Biden administration to take control of talks to renew exclusive military access in three of the Pacific Island states, a move seen as critical to checking China, after discussion has bogged down partly over negotiations on decades-old nuclear waste.

At issue is the Pentagon's continued access to basing rights in the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, and Palau, where the United States has placed missile defenses and hopes to expand airfields. The multi-year effort to secure military access comes as China has expanded its own foothold not only in the South China Sea, with airfields and military installations, but as far afield as Kiribati, an island group in the eastern Pacific, south of Hawaii; in response, the United States has sought to challenge Chinese claims to sovereignty with repeated freedom of navigation operations.

In a letter sent on Monday to Kurt Campbell, the U.S. National Security Council's top Asia official, Reps. Katie Porter and Raúl Grijalva demanded the appointment of a presidential envoy to manage the talks, which hope to renew deals formally known as the Compacts of Free Association. State and Interior Department officials leading the talks have stonewalled the islanders on key issues, the lawmakers wrote, including dealing with the leakage of U.S. radioactive waste in parts of the Marshall Islands, a relic of the Pentagon's first nuclear tests in the 1940s and 1950s.

"This approach reflected a broader lack of perspective, which sought to cut overall assistance to the [freely associated states] despite their growing geostrategic importance," Porter and Grijalva, who both serve on the House Committee on Natural Resources, wrote to Campbell. "It failed to recognize that the factor that makes the [freely associated states] so crucial strategically—relatively remote and distant locations—creates economic challenges which necessitate U.S. aid."

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Lawmakers and officials worry that a failure to extend the deals, which expires at the end of 2023 for Micronesia and the Marshall Islands, and in 2024 for Palau, could give China a leg up in courting Pacific Island states. The United States has consistently refused to pay billions in claims for damages ordered by a joint tribunal ruling stemming from the U.S. nuclear weapons testing program in the Marshall Islands that has caused expansive and ongoing harm to public health and the environment.

"China seeks to undermine U.S. relationships with the [freely associated states], with potentially grave consequences for U.S. national security and interests," Porter and Grijalva wrote. The Marshall Islands and Palau both recognize Taiwan diplomatically, and could face

repeated pressure from China to change their minds, as have other smaller nations. One atoll in the Marshalls, Rongelap, entered into negotiations with China in 2019 to become an independent country before the central Marshall Islands government shut down the effort.

State and Interior Department-led negotiations for the military basing deals have run aground in recent months, as officials in the region have been frustrated with the lack of high-level attention to the Compacts of Free Association, which oblige the United States to defend and provide aid to the “freely associated states.”

Porter and Grijalva wrote that island negotiators have been frustrated that deals proposed by U.S. officials would not address previously announced plans to switch monetary assistance to Micronesia and the Marshall Islands from aid grants to trust funds by 2023. U.S. watchdogs have expressed fears that the trust fund money, meant to boost self-sufficiency in the region, could quickly run out.

Both the Marshall Islands and Palau have asked for a presidential negotiator, and Palau’s newly-elected president, Surangel Whipps Jr., visited the White House this summer and expressed anger about the negotiations at an August dinner in Washington. “He feels very strongly that the State Department is not taking it seriously enough,” said a former U.S. official who attended the dinner. That person said Whipps conveyed the same message to Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland.

A State Department spokesperson said the United States had offered to renew the Compacts of Free Association deals that are still under discussion with each government. “The Biden-Harris administration puts a high priority on these important negotiations to strengthen our partnerships with these three Pacific Island nations,” the spokesperson said. “We continue to welcome views from our [freely associated state] counterparts as well as from the Congress.”

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Since the end of the Trump administration, the United States has maintained that it wants to make only minor changes to the pacts, the former U.S. official said. But the expiration of the compacts could jeopardize the Pentagon’s ability to continue to turn the islands and atolls into a critical counterweight against China. The Pacific Islands are already critical to U.S. missile defenses. The Army base on Kwajalein atoll in the Marshalls is one of the top test sites for ballistic missiles and space operations. Palau hosts air, maritime, and mobile over-the-horizon radars, and the Defense Department is also eyeing new airfields on the archipelago. U.S. military officials agreed to build a major new base in Micronesia during talks in Hawaii this summer, though it’s not clear when or where that will occur.

The limited U.S. focus on the region, and the mercenary approach, could backfire as Beijing pushes out its defense perimeter beyond the first island chain toward the central Pacific. “It feeds into China’s narrative that we are just viewing the region as a battlefield for great power competition,” said Craig Singleton, an adjunct China fellow at the Foundation for Defense of



Democracies and former U.S. diplomat.

China has also tried to use the checkered American nuclear legacy in the islands as a wedge issue. The United States conducted biological weapons tests and dumped hundreds of tons of irradiated waste in the Marshall Islands after the Pentagon detonated 67 nuclear weapons over the area between 1946 and 1958. Local officials say the United States has failed to account for the damage, which has led to radioactivity in some parts of the islands that is higher than in Chernobyl, the site of an infamous Soviet nuclear reactor meltdown in 1986. One congressional aide told *Foreign Policy* that officials in the Marshall Islands have been clear that they will not sign a new Compacts of Freed Association deal without the nuclear issue being resolved.

As the expiration dates of the Compacts of Free Association creep up, China will be seeking to capitalize on differences between the United States and the Pacific Islands; it has already (albeit unsuccessfully) sought to lease parts of the Solomon Islands and attempted to convert a major wharf on Vanuatu's largest island into a "dual-use" facility for military forces.

"China will be looking for a potential opening within the year," said Derek Grossman, a senior defense analyst at the Rand Corporation.

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